

Patrizia Panarello

**MIGRANT IDENTITIES.
INTERCULTURAL AND POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES**

Being part and parcel of the world which counts.

The fact that we all can either attend this seminar or not makes us aware at least of one of the predominant ways in which the world is divided: whether we have drinking water, food, adequate medicines or not, whether we can read and write or not, whether we can plug into public education or not. Though the divide can be drawn according to several parameters, it is to be remarked that we are part and parcel of that part of the world which benefits from a series of privileges and, furthermore, we represents that part of the world which has never been in the unpleasant position of those who have always lived on the borderland of society, systematically shut out of every majority. This is because we, the white Western Europeans – according to the definition used by Ryszard Kapuściński, a Polish writer and journalist– are the rule, that is we are that part and parcel of the world which is authorized to speak for itself and for the others. Differently from who has no voice and cannot make history, we are not compelled to live in a world which does not belong to us and to which we feel we do not belong: this is one of the fundamental differences existing between the privileged and the damned ones of the world, just to mention a renowned passage by Fanon, a Martinican psychiatrist, writer and philosopher.

Different views.

The divide between us and the others also determines the way according to which the world is rated. According to Stuart Hall, an English sociologist of Jamaican origin, we cannot deal with words such as “subject”, “identity” or “global” as if they had predetermined meanings. In fact, if we deal with the subject not from the cosmopolitan intellectual’s, the university professor’s or the world theoretician scholar’s point of view but from the one of the migrants, of those living on the fringe, of the nomads, of the frightened minorities – according to the definition given by Arjun Appadurai, an American anthropologist of native origins – who are compelled to live in detention camps passed off as town or refugee camp in Israel, Darfur or Sierra Leone, then all discourses on identities, cultures, rights, globalization, war, violence take on quite different meanings. As Arjun Appadurai affirmed:

“for those who live in the United States or in one of the other ten richest countries in the world, globalization is a positive term, in vogue among multinational élites and their political allies, but for migrants, colored people, and marginalized ones (the so called “northern south”) it represents a source of worry about matters such as social inclusion, occupation and further marginalization [...]”

Similarly, Robert Young, a postcolonial theorist and historian, affirms

“Few people outside the world of business and economy consider globalization as a positive phenomenon; very often the agencies which favor such a process, in particular the World Bank, the FMI and the WTO are objects of deep social contempt. What is objected to the World Bank is that it tends to set parameters and conditions which meet its own economic needs, but not those of the countries involved [...]. As to the WTO, it seems to be a mere attachment useful only to help the western and

transnational firms to accede other markets in the most convenient way to themselves, and therefore to favour just one of the interested parties and to do absolutely nothing to relieve the commercial exploitation from which non-western world is suffering.

For all those who actually live in subordination circumstances and financial difficulties, the issue of international trade takes on a fundamental importance if we just consider that it is on the price of the goods that the life conditions of millions of small producers – often in debt and without any decision-making power on land, goods and even their own life – depends.

Nomadism.

Also the idea of nomadism can take on different meanings according to one's social position in the world. For instance, the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari developed the idea of nomadism as a strategic concept to point to those who resist to the social control set by civil services and therefore as a form of resistance against a hegemonic control. Following what has already been said, many western postmodern authors have tried to characterize nomadism and migration as positive and productive examples of creative and dynamic identity forms if compared to the ones depending on a strong physical affiliation to families and places. They are in fact mentioned as subjects able to get by positively, creatively and even innovatively on topics as identity, belonging, diversity, global-local relation, citizenship and democracy. For instance, Marco Dallari, an Italian pedagogist, states that

“[...] the subjects’ great recognisability in comparison with the features of the country of origin and belonging in an age of world culture, nomadism and «hybridization» is by now more a «provincial» limit than an advantage and a certainty in interpersonal relationships”.

Nonetheless, it is still to consider, as Robert Young underlined, the point of view of several peasant communities all over the world and of twenty millions of refugees who not only do not own any land from a material point of view, but also in their existential condition: stateless, homeless, landless. In this case, the concept of nomadism takes on a totally different meaning as it is not any longer a theoretical problem but a practical and concrete one, a problem dealing with everyday survival.

Cultural studies.

Cultural studies intend to be the political voice of the subordinate, of the oppressed classes and peoples. They represent a kind of political act on reality, that is a political behaviour which is morally engaged to transform exploitation and poverty conditions which millions of people all over the world experience daily. This is why they are not and cannot be considered as a real scientific theory. Dealing with several subjects which concern different themes and authors (as woman’s position, subjects related to development, ecology, social justice, egalitarian relationship among different peoples), cultural studies present themselves as a hybrid and trans-disciplinary field. A field which is contaminated, in constant development, including a whole series of perspectives, which are interrelated and juxtaposed, sometimes contradictorily. But they have a common goal: the formulation of theoretical perspectives which dispute

the western patterns of conceiving the world and the development of anti-elitist ideals, that is an alternative knowledge to the extant power.

Migrants.

Dealing with the modes through which culture and power operate on our society, Abdelmalek Sayad, an Algerian sociologist, in his work entitled *La double absence: Des illusions de l'emigré aux souffrances de l'immigré* carries out a critical analysis on power wielding and on how power itself becomes engrossed in the bodies and in the minds through the interiorization operated by the subjects. To him, studying migrations is a critical analysis on how the immigrant worker is not only colonized but also self-colonized. In his preface to the Italian edition, Salvatore Palidda, mentioning Bourdieu and Wacquant, writes:

«Savad demonstrates that a migrant is *àtopos*, a curious placeless hybrid, a “displaced” one in the double meaning both of incongruous and of inappropriate, trapped in that hybrid sector of social space in an intermediate position between a social being and a non-being. Neither citizen, nor stranger, neither on the Self’s side, nor on the other’s one, a migrant exists only by defect in the community of origin and only by excess in the receiving society, therefore periodically generating in both recrimination and resentment. Out of place in both social systems which define his non-existence, a migrant, because of his inexorable persecution and the mental embarrass it conveys, compel us to reconsider thoroughly the matter of the legitimate bases of citizenship and of the relationship among citizen, state and nation».

A deep-rooted and fundamental dimension of the migratory phenomenon is the political one. When a human being is no longer happy with his condition, with himself, with what the world in which he lives offers him or with what he can

concretely aspire to, then there arise the decision to emigrate, the aspiration to improve his existence, in seek of knowledge and exploration. As Sayad writes, mentioning a speech of a Cabilian emigrant interviewed in France in 1975:

“[...] hunger does not only refer to what we eat. It is also the hunger of the back [the need of clothes], of the feet [the need of shoes], of the bellyache [the need of medical cures], of the roof [the need of a shelter], of the head [the need of educating children]. It is not just this: if you do not have salt, you eat tasteless food or if you do not have paraffin, you go to bed in the dark! [...]”.

It is the aim for emancipation which gives to migrations a “subversive” character both toward the society of origin, that of destination and toward a European and world set-up which claims to impose freedom of action for all strong social actors and the denial of emancipatory opportunities to all the others.

Identities.

When, dealing with identities, we apply a relativist and deconstructionist perspective, we have to refer to the 1988 Nobel laureate for Economics Amartya Sen’s work, who affirms that there are those who have the opportunity of choosing among alternative identities or also among combinations of identities (being even in a position to rank the several identities owned) and those who do not share the same option. The fundamental difference between those who can and those who cannot choose to have one or more identities is the same one which exists between who is *a subject who translates the world* and who has to realize he is *a subject who has been translated*. In both cases, the dynamics of identity definition and self-definition deal

with power relationships and ruling modes. Bourdieu (2005) affirmed that it is the social conditions within which individuals act that determine the way in which practical and theoretical thinking patterns of one's self and the world are built.

Therefore, if several scholars describe the contemporary subject in terms of anxiety, weakness, impurity, segmentation (a subject which is “in crisis”, precarious, dysmorphic, marginalized, lost, substituted, disjointed, with an existence which can be defined in terms of thrownness and conflict, but also of complexity, historicity, dissemination, openness, alterity and difference)¹, it is not fair to say that the same description can also successfully fit to those contemporary subjects who belong to the so called “minority” groups, i.e. groups living at the borderland of the world politico-economical system, often in a state of permanent war.

Therefore Robert Young provocatively asks how the postmodern migratory identity could be celebrated in the same way both by those who occupy privileged positions in the society and by those who, instead, are compelled to live in the refugee camps in Qetta, Jazolai and other places in Pakistan – together with their 2.5 millions of Afghan refugees (representing about the 12% of the world total) – or in the refugee camps in the West Bank or in the Australian detention camp in Woomera²

¹ Franco Frabboni, an Italian pedagogist, sketches out a character of “an astonished and powerless” subject who lives in an ambivalent world, which is often incomprehensible and incommunicable”. Within this framework, uncertain, problematic, ambivalent, fragmented, unstable, incoherent and inconsistent identities lie. There is a reference to identities which are always unaccomplished, pushed by internal and external anonymous forces and to a «subject who is no longer self-sufficient, who has no longer an identity fixity and certainty».

² This camp is located in the middle of the desert, 300 miles from the nearest city and, during the

Violence in postmodern society.

Then, the pressing question which Appadurai asks is the following: why is the age of late modernism – even though it is characterized by market openness, freedom of capital circulation, liberal ideas of constitutional governments, good government and free expansion of human rights – an age of violence on an expansive scale in several societies and political regimes? Amartya Sen affirms that:

“Many of the conflicts and atrocities of the world are grounded on the illusion of a univocal identity and without any opportunity of choice. The art of arousing hate takes the form of a magic power of a determinate identity, passed off as dominant, which stifles other affiliations and can go as far as to crush any human sympathy or natural kindness with which we could be normally endowed. The result may come as an elementary, artisanal violence or as a global and sophisticated violence and terrorism”.

In our opinion, the problem deals on one hand with the cultural dimensions of globalization and on the other with the political circumstances in which knowledge is produced. Appadurai states that nowadays there seems to emerge two Europes: one of inclusion and multiculturalism and one of xenophobia and violence. Violence, the anthropologist continues, above all the extreme and “spectacular” one, is done especially when the reasons of social uncertainty joins to other fears related to inequality growth, national sovereignty loss or threats to local safeness or to the life itself. And there comes the unexpected return of the patriot body, of the martyr, of the sacrificial victim within the framework of mass violence. One of the most recent

day, outside temperature raises as high as 42°. In 2002 many Afghan refugees sutured their lips using needle and thread in order to draw attention on their condition. Others, children included, tried to commit suicide (see Young: 65-66).

forms of violence of the last years – one which causes public and media shock – is given by the videoing of kidnapping and, in some cases, of beheading of their victims by militant Islamic groups. In Appadurai's opinion, this is the involuntary counterpart of suicide bombers, that is of violence forms which emerge as means of political expression able to exert pressure on several Countries. In both cases, we are dealing with ideologies which produce victims and martyrs as an instrument of freedom. Such ideologies can be seen, Appadurai declares, also as a moral answer, shocking as it may be, to the tortured, enchained, humbled, photographed and filmed bodies of Muslim men which are under American guard (as, for instance, in Iraq).

Minorities.

It should be underlined that the main goals of marginalization and purges are often given by minorities, that is by those who occupy that grey area which, according to an apt description given by Appadurai, lies between a real citizenship and humanity in general. Strangers, nomads, religious dissidents and “minority” social groups raise the question on human rights, citizenship, belonging, certainties which Governments should grant them. Because of their intermediate condition they raise uncertainties; their ambiguous social status, their movements, their faiths are all troublesome elements, which hardly fit the framework of national borders, within the concepts of belonging, pureness, ethnic exclusiveness. They are therefore elements which trespass on all borders: on those between us and them, between here and elsewhere, between inside and outside. They are on the fringes, in a liminal area, and are

therefore considered impure, unsafe, repellent, dirt (to mention Mary Douglas, an anthropologist, who defines as dirt all that is out of place). In particular, migrants are defined by Alessandro Dal Lago, an Italian sociologist, as *non-person*, that is people who usually for political or ideological reasons are removed from cognition or consideration. They are then invisible, non-existent, excluded, socially removed.

Hope stories.

But there are also other stories, other visions which are less dramatic and more utopian (using the term in its best meaning) which can be told here. For instance, the stories dealing with the ability to organize into political organizations, to mobilize and put forward claims on behalf of subjects, groups, social movements which are found in different areas of the world. They are stories of alternative tales which bring along with themselves the buds of many counter-globalization perspectives. In particular, India abounds with visions which desire to explore the democratic potential of globalization.

In our opinion, marginal experiences should be translated non according a one way translational process but rather in terms of cultural interaction and, accordingly, as the creation of a counter-power area where to activate antagonist translational forces. In this respect, to translate means also discourse as well as activist and performative writing which aim at the production of material effects on the reader and the listener.

Raymond Williams, a British sociologist, distinguished between “indicative” and “conjunctive texts”. The former are only a mirror of the historical conditions and

contradictions in which they have been produced; the latter have a higher intellectual value since they also contain within themselves some answers to the most pressing problems of their time.

Such an instance is found in the works *Black Skin. White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth* by Fanon, where the author makes an attempt to give shape to a possible counter-translation opposed to the images with which black men and women – as colonial subjects – had been represented and represented themselves in their turn. The problem, Rober Young writes, is that they were compelled to consider themselves as the other, alienated from their own culture, language and land (Young: 172).

Interculture.

They, the marginalized, the migrant, the black who suffered from a change of their desires as well, should gain back their subjectivity becoming they themselves translators, writers, active subjects of their own history. But, to make this happen, it is necessary to carry out a dialogic and dynamic education model, as the one proposed by Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed³, and to form, to educate mediators, translators, experts and intercultural specialists able to cope with this essentially pedagogical task.

Miguel Mellino, in his preface to Stuart Hall's "*The Subject and the Difference*"

³ A Brazilian educator and influential theorist of pedagogy, Paulo Freire contributed to a philosophy of education arising not only from the most classical of the approaches which stemmed from Plato, but also from modern Marxist and anti-colonialist thinkers. In fact, in many ways his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* may be best read as an extension of, or reply to, Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, which emphasized the need to provide native populations with a new and anti-colonial education.

uses the expression “*agency spaces*” to translate what constantly resists to subjection, that is to point out those forms of subjectivity which are able to emerge inside and against what we can mention, with Deleuze, as “the moral logic of the power, the state-nation, the capital”. It is a kind of “third space” which can materialize only through shortcuts of the dominating ideology, in the encounter of *subaltern worlds* with the discourse spread by knowledge, markets, cultural agencies and other ideological structures used by the dominant classes in order to keep their power. According to Stuart Hall, the *agency space* is the space of the articulation or of the translation, of the fight of the borderland or of the Other to describe himself, to access to the representation of his own identity and subjectivity.

In our opinion, we who are on this side of the barricade should become aware of our shortcomings and of what Velleda Bolognari has termed as “the spaces of other people’s non-subjectivity”. There is the need, the scholar goes on, of a post-ideological intercultural manifest, that is one which have a program of thought decolonization from the contemporary myths of progress, science and technique as an exclusive form of development; a program educating to creativity and to a way of thinking which is critical, intuitive and relational, able to invent a new future.